

## MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

### 1. THE SUNDARBANS TIGER

The Sundarbans is a diverse ecosystem. It is the largest tract of estuarine forests in the whole world covering about 10,000 square kilometres and presently one of the largest chunks of undisturbed forests. It possibly forms an ideal habitat for the tiger though an inhospitable one.

The vast expanse of swamps studded closely with a network of tiny islands and mudflats supports a low wooded forest of high density. The rivers around the tiny mudflats form fantastic labyrinths, where the hard and pointed pneumatophores give a trying time to the life forms of the Sundarbans.

Human casualty has been reported from all over the 15 blocks (65 compartments) covering 2585 sq.km of Sundarbans tiger project area. This observation records the presence of aggressive maneaters all over the project area indicating perhaps a high population of tigers.

The migration of tiger from block to block and across international boundary is a feature, as the animal has been sighted negotiating vast expanses of open water. This may be in search of elevated lands above inundation level and also in search of prey, especially human beings.

The average annual human casualty has been reported to be 36, but unofficial reports record about 100 (the forest being contiguous with Bangladesh forests). Dead bodies could only be recovered from the maneaters in about 28.5% of cases.

Human casualty figures fluctuate from the lowest recorded during the rains to the highest during April and May. During these two months the entire estuarine forests become very

active owing to millions of trees throwing out new flush of leaves and flowers which attract swarms of *Apis dorsata* and honey combs can be seen all over the project area. This coincides with the activities of all types of life forms such as Molluscs and Crustacea. The tigers seize this opportunity to kill large number of honey collectors besides fishermen, shell collectors, timber coupe workers, etc. during this season.

The maneaters have an uncanny understanding of human nature as they kill men between 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. (morning), 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. (afternoon) when the workers are either enroute to their work site or are preparing to return to their camps in the evening (80% human casualty). Some of the most notorious and cunning maneaters swim to boats, clamber in, choose their victim and jump into water with the dead body and get back to the forests. This usually occurs after 11 p.m. when the boatmen are fast asleep.

Middle aged men (between 35 to 45) form about 80% of human casualty figures.

Pigs and deer which are primary food animals occur in abundance but the terrain, is a serious handicap for the tigers to catch such animals and are compelled by circumstances, therefore, to take monkeys, fish, birds, crabs and even honey.

The maximum casualty occurs just before full moon and new moon.

The Sundarbans forest need to be conserved not only for the tiger but to act as a natural barrier against severe cyclonic storms during the monsoon months. However, acute might be the immediate public need, these estuarine

mangrove swamp have to be preserved to fight the mighty tidal waves of the Bay of Bengal and to protect the lives and properties of millions of poor villagers residing adjacent to the forests. Project tiger is therefore essentially a environment conservation project.

The local people of the Sundarbans have a firm conviction that death is an inevitable phenomenon and occurs as decreed by the Tiger-God and there is nothing one can do about it; they have reconciled themselves to a

co-existence with maneaters; as a supernatural creature that cannot be exterminated. The tiger is accepted as a hard reality in the life style of the Sundarbans and people are only made to observe elaborate rituals of ground rules to ensure co-existence with the maneaters. People of all religions, irrespective of their social position, caste and creed, sit together and prey for survival against this "magical" animal. This is the philosophy of man's relationship with the Sundarbans tigers.

DIVISIONAL FOREST OFFICER,  
PLANNING & STATISTICS,  
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF CONSERVATOR OF  
FORESTS, WEST BENGAL,  
NEW C.I.T. BLDG.,  
P-16, INDIA EXCHANGE PLACE EXTN.,  
CALCUTTA-700 073,  
January 22, 1984.

KALYAN CHAKRABARTI

## 2. INTERACTION BETWEEN GAUR AND TIGER IN BHADRA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

On 24.xi.1983, along with several forest officers I was on the wildlife viewing machan located at 'Chandrana Hadlu', a grassy swamp in Muthodi range of Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary (Karnataka State). We were observing (through 8 x 50 binoculars) an artificial salt lick in the open, surrounded by young Teak plantations.

At 6.15 p.m. a young Bull Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) came rushing out of the teak plantation and stood looking back anxiously emitting snorts of alarm. Within a couple of minutes a Junglefowl (*Gallus sonneratii*) gave alarm, followed by a herd of spotted deer (*Axis axis*) in the woods. Along the path used by the gaur, a tigress (*Leo tigris*) came out of the plantation into the open. The gaur which was

about 30 metres away started off to run, then stopped. The tigress came out slowly, emitting low moans but showing no sign of aggression or hostility. The Gaur stood its ground, with ears pricked forward alertly. At one point the two animals were only about 20 metres apart, the tigress totally ignoring the gaur, which took a couple of hesitant steps towards the tigress and then stopped. The tigress strolled onwards leisurely, sniffing at the grass and moaning now and then. While the tigress drank from a pool of water 80 metres away, the gaur relaxed and started feeding. Throughout the entire period the tigress totally ignored the gaur as well as the continuous alarm calls of spotted deer and sambar (*Cervus unicolor*) from the surrounding woods. A wild tusker in *musth*